

THE LESSONS OF WORLD WAR II's MISTAKES

Negotiations and Armed Power Flexibly Combined

HANS J. MORGENTHAU

SINCE the prophets of the Old Testament read the warnings of God in the catastrophes of history, men have tried to discover what history can teach them. As Oedipus and Perseus once sought guidance from the Oracle, their empirically inclined descendants search through the record of the past. Yet the results have hardly been different. The more closely men listened to what history seemed to tell them, and the more eager they were to act in accordance with it, the less were they able to extricate themselves from the consequences of their actions, often succeeding only in bringing down the very catastrophes they were trying to escape. If it is true that the only thing history teaches is that it teaches nothing,

THE record of history, HANS J. MORGENTHAU suggests, is not to be read as a handbook of simple and unmistakable instructions for present and future policy; those who have come out of World War II with no more than a few absolute catchwords—"no appeasement" (meaning no negotiations) or "no provocation" (meaning no display of strength or threat of military action)—may be courting disaster. At the same time there are some lessons which can be learned from both the mistakes and the successes of past wars and diplomatic activities—Professor Morgenthau offers a few such lessons for our consideration. Professor Morgenthau is director of the Center for the Study of American Foreign Policy at the University of Chicago. He was consultant to the Department of State in 1949 and 1951, and lecturer at the Air War College and the Army War College, 1950-1951. He is the author of *In Defense of the National Interest* (1951), co-author of *The H-Bomb* (1950), and editor of *Germany and the Future of Europe* (1951). He was born in 1904 in Germany, and took degrees at the University of Munich (1927), the University of Frankfurt (1929), and the Graduate Institute for International Studies at Geneva (1932).

should we not be done with the "teachings" of history and put our trust in action unencumbered by knowledge of the past? To reason thus, however, would be to misunderstand history in yet another way. Though we cannot look to history for ready-made rules of action, this still does not mean that it has nothing to tell us at all.

Two recent books try to explain the mistakes that we and the enemy made in the Second World War. The way these books were written and then received, and the way in which the United States, in particular, has been trying to avoid and repair the mistakes made in the Second World War, afford illuminating examples of what history can—and cannot—teach.

CHESTER WILMOT's *The Struggle for Europe* (Harper), by far the more important of the two, deals with the roots of our mistakes, as well as with the mistakes themselves. It has created a sensation in England and, to a lesser extent, in the United States.

Mr. Wilmot writes the military history of the late war in Europe from the time of the Normandy invasion, and tries to ascertain the causes of the political failures that attended upon Allied military successes. It is in this last effort that the permanent value of the book lies.

The conduct of the military campaign in Western Europe was dominated by the conflict between the strategic conceptions of General Montgomery, on the one hand, and Generals Eisenhower and Bradley, on the other. Montgomery wanted a decisive thrust from Belgium through the North German plain, destroying the German armies in one bold stroke and ending the war in 1944; the course actually pursued by Eisenhower and Bradley was a methodical advance on a

broad front, sacrificing the chances of quick victory to the systematic elimination of all resistance. Mr. Wilmot and large sections of British public opinion take Montgomery's side in retrospect, while most American commentators have indignantly rejected the suggestion that Eisenhower and Bradley might have been wrong.

Some problems of strategy indeed deserve *ex post facto* analysis. The fall of France in 1940 might teach us a lesson about the value of Maginot Lines we might be building today. The demonstrated inefficiency of saturation bombing, especially in relation to the resources committed and the non-military damage caused, might teach us a similar lesson. That frontal attacks against defenses in depth are bound to be costly, and likely to be indecisive, and can only be justified by a proportionate military advantage, the Western Front during the First World War might have taught us; but we had to learn this lesson over again in Italy, and who knows whether we have really learned it even yet?

But the controversy raised by Mr. Wilmot's discussion of strategy is not concerned with fruitful questions like this. The question he asks is unanswerable by its very nature. It would be answerable only—and then indeed in favor of Montgomery—if Eisenhower and Bradley had known in the fall and winter of 1944-45 what everybody knows now, or if at that time Montgomery had known it and Eisenhower and Bradley had not. As it was—and as is inevitable in the conduct of foreign policy by peaceful or military means—all three generals proceeded on the basis of guesses. One made a guess as to the distribution of power between the Allied and the German armies, and suggested a line of strategy following from it. Different people made different guesses and arrived at different strategic conclusions. Montgomery was ready to gamble on the weakness of the German armies, and captured German documents extensively quoted by Mr. Wilmot, as well as subsequent events, seem to prove him right. Eisenhower and Bradley, aware of the lives and issues at

stake, preferred a slower and safer course. To blame them for this is like blaming a cautious investor for preferring slow yet sure gains to the bold and risky maneuvers of a brilliant gambler. There is little doubt that Eisenhower's and Bradley's strategy lacked brilliance and imagination and operated rather like a scientific engineering project, but only the most assertive amateur strategist will feel sure that they were therefore wrong; others will remember the brilliance of Napoleon and Ludendorff and how many costly battles they won only to lose their wars in the end.

When Mr. Wilmot comes to the reasons for the *political* failures in a war so thoroughly won in the military field, his indictment of American strategy is, however, unanswerable. We fought the war, he maintains, without giving much thought to the relation between the kind of military victory we were planning to win and the political settlement that would follow it. Mr. Wilmot arrives at this conclusion after a minute examination of the military and diplomatic decisions of the period. Others, such as George F. Kennan and myself, have arrived at the very same conclusion, from an over-all examination of American attitudes toward foreign policy and war as revealed in our policies during and after the First and Second World Wars.

THE fundamental error behind all the individual blunders committed toward the end of the Second World War, and immediately afterwards, was the neglect of Karl von Clausewitz's dictum that war is the continuation of policy by other means. The peaceful and warlike means by which a nation pursues its interests form a continuous process in which, though one means may replace the other, the ends remain the same. We also failed to recognize that foreign policy itself is a continuum beginning with the birth of a state and ending only with its death; isolationists and interventionists alike tended to believe that the "normal" thing for a state was to have no foreign policy at all. What separated the interventionists from the isolationists was the belief that cer-

tain crises might require, at least temporarily, an active foreign policy. But even the interventionists felt that after solving the given crisis one could try to return to a position of detachment, though developing and supporting in the meantime international institutions designed to meet the next crisis if and when it should arise. Foreign policy was thus regarded as something like a policeman's nightstick, to be used only when it was necessary to bring a disturber of the peace to reason; war, in turn, was like the policeman's gun, to be used only *in extremis* to rid the world of a criminal. But here the analogy ends: the policeman always carries his gun with him, but we threw ours away twice after it had done the job.

War, we could see, did have a necessary connection with what preceded it—that is, with the criminal aggression that provoked it—but it had no organic relation with what followed it. Its purpose was only to eliminate a disturbance by eliminating the disturber; once that was done, the world would presumably settle back into normalcy and order. War, then, was a mere technical operation to be performed according to the rules of military art—a feat of military engineering like building a dam or flattening a mountain. To allow considerations of political expediency to interfere with military operations was unwise from the military point of view and might well be considered an immoral subversion of one self-sufficient department of human action for the sake of another. (It might be added in passing that economic specialists—for instance, administrators of ECA—have shown a very similar reluctance, for similar reasons, to let political considerations “violate” the autonomy of economic operations.)

Mr. Wilmot is fully justified in contrasting the a-political American approach to war with the continuous and generally fruitless insistence of Churchill and his subordinates on the political significance of military action. The British and the Russians knew from long experience that wars are not fought just to bring about the unconditional surrender of the enemy; wars are means to

political ends, and military victory, if it is to bear political fruits, must be shaped to those ends.

American military leaders were aware of this difference in outlook, both on the battlefield and afterwards. In April 1945, when the British wanted Patton's army to liberate as much of Czechoslovakia as possible, and Prague in particular, for the sake of the political advantages to be gained thereby, General Marshall passed the suggestion on to General Eisenhower with this comment: “Personally, and aside from all logistic, tactical, or strategical implications, I would be loath to hazard American lives for purely political reasons.” Marshall had nothing to worry about in this respect, for Eisenhower replied the next day: “I shall not attempt any move I deem militarily unwise merely to gain a political advantage unless I receive specific orders from the Combined Chiefs of Staff.” The matter rested there despite repeated and urgent appeals from Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff. Similar decisions were made on other occasions. General Bradley in his memoirs has this to say of the British insistence that the Americans take Berlin before the Russians: “As soldiers we looked naively on this British inclination to complicate the war with political foresight and non-military objectives.”

This concentration on military objectives to the neglect of political considerations has one virtue: it is apt to win wars quickly, cheaply, and thoroughly. Yet such victories may be short-lived, and an enormous political and military price may have to be paid for them later.

II

THERE is, however, another approach—extreme in a different way—that cannot even claim military advantages; this is to subordinate military considerations entirely to political ones. Of this approach, F. H. Hinsley's *Hitler's Strategy* (Cambridge), describes a classic example.

Hitler thought primarily in political terms. Yet his thinking had two fatal weaknesses. On the one hand, his political think-

ing was faulty in itself, for the objectives he set for Germany had no relation to either the power available to her or the power of the resistance to be overcome. On the other hand, far from using war as a continuation of policy by other means, he destroyed the technical autonomy of war altogether, using it as though there were no differences at all between war and policy. War became in his hands a political plaything, indistinguishable in its technical aspects from foreign policy—a foreign policy itself doomed to failure by its gross unrealism.

Hitler had a pathological craving to involve in his struggle all the non-committed countries of the world. To see a great nation standing aside uncommitted, was a challenge to his lust for power that he could not resist. But another reason why he chose this suicidal course was his fantastic misconceptions about that part of the world which lay beyond his own personal experience. He knew virtually nothing about the United States; what he knew about the Soviet Union was mostly wrong; and he underestimated Great Britain.

It is obvious from Mr. Hinsley's book that the Soviet Union had no aggressive designs on Germany, and indeed went out of her way to be as accommodating as possible. The German diplomatic and intelligence reports that Mr. Hinsley cites are virtually unanimous in the conviction that the Soviet Union would fight only if attacked. Nevertheless, Hitler was resolved to attack her. He voiced repeatedly his opinion that the Soviet Union would be a pushover, and that the campaign begun in June of 1941 would be over the same autumn. And he went ahead to make plans for autumn campaigns elsewhere to follow the defeat of the Soviet Union. As late as September 17, 1941, he was certain that "the end of September will bring the great decision in the Russian campaign."

To win a war without regard for the political consequences of the victory may create political problems as serious or worse than those that the victory was intended to settle; but such a victory leaves you at least in a position to learn and to try to settle political

problems by peaceful means. To overrate the strength of your own country because it is yours and to underrate that of the enemy because you hate him, and to wage war as if warfare were a mere extension of politics and *nothing more*, can lead only to disaster.

III

HAVE we learned these lessons? On the face of it, it seems we have. Certainly we have been almost obsessed with the need to fashion our postwar policies so as to avoid the mistakes we and others made during the Second World War. We have learned that a power vacuum in the vicinity of a great dynamic nation will exert a well-nigh irresistible attraction. We have learned that in order to confine such a state within the limits necessary to our own security, it is not enough to show good will and reasonableness and to embody virtuous intentions in legal instruments. We have learned that the balance of power, far from being just an arbitrary device of reactionary diplomats and Machiavellian scholars, is the very law of life for independent units dealing with other independent units—domestic or international—that want to preserve their independence. Independent power, in order to be kept in check, must be met by independent power of approximately equal strength. In the effort to apply these lessons, we have now embarked upon a long-range policy of "containment" and rearmament.

We have also learned that an imperialist power confronted with a coalition of powers of varying strength will attempt to eliminate the weaker members one after the other, until the most powerful member is left in the end outmaneuvered and alone. We have therefore developed an intricate system of alliances in the Western Hemisphere, Europe, and Asia, which, whatever the differences of legal language and institutional device, all amount to a declaration that we shall defend the territorial integrity of the members of these alliances as we would our own. We call this system of alliances "collective security," and have put it into operation by defending the Republic of South

Korea against aggression by North Korea.

In these ways, we have obviously learned from history. Why, then, are we as uncertain as ever about the success of our policies, and still beset by doubts about the course we have been taking in recent years? Have we still missed one of the important lessons of recent history, or have we misunderstood what it seemed to teach us? The truth is, though we have learned the lessons of recent history chapter and verse, though we have memorized them and have never tired of reciting and applying them whenever faced with a problem which seemed to be similar to one of those that we failed to solve during the Second World War, yet we have failed to see that behind the specific lessons of history learnt from specific blunders, there stands *the* lesson of history, of *all* history, which alone gives meaning to the lessons to be derived from any particular period.

All political action is an attempt to influence human behavior, hence all political action must be aware of the complexities and ambiguities of the human factor, and must itself be ambiguous and complex—and in the right way. The political actor, conscious of history, must be aware of the malleability of the human will, yet he must also be aware of the limits of suasion and of the need for objective barriers to the human will. *While he is making use of suasion, he must not be oblivious to the role of power, and vice versa*, and of each he must have just the *right* quantity and quality, neither too much nor too little, neither too early nor too late, neither too strong nor too weak.

He must choose the right admixture not only in terms of human nature, permanent as such but with the relations of its elements ever changing, but also in terms of the changing historical circumstances under which those elements of human nature confront each other in the form of collectivities called nations. How much suasion and power, and of what kind, is available on my side at a particular moment in history, and how much of it and what kind is likely to be available tomorrow? How much and what kind of susceptibility to suasion and power

is present on the other side at a particular moment of history, and how much and what kind is likely to be present tomorrow? And how much and what kind of suasion and power is the other side able to bring to bear upon me and others today and tomorrow? Such are the questions posed by the ever-changing social environment.

When, during the closing years of the past war, we thought that Stalin was a somewhat gruff old gentleman who could be charmed into cooperation, we relied on suasion to a greater extent than the teachings of history justified. We think we have learned our lesson from this failure of a policy of suasion pure and simple. Now we seem to have forsworn suasion altogether and to rely exclusively upon force as a deterrent to the ambitions of the Politburo. We seem to forget that force as the instrument of a foreign policy aiming at the peaceful settlement of international conflicts must be a means to the end of foreign policy, not an end in itself. Force supplements suasion, but does not replace it. Secretary of State Acheson recognized this relation between suasion and force in the abstract when he proclaimed repeatedly that the objective of our foreign policy was the creation of situations of strength from which to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the Soviet Union. In practice, however, our foreign policy, preoccupied as it is with rearmament, seems to have lost sight of this objective. Consequently, it has not faced up squarely to the all-important question of timing: when shall we consider ourselves strong enough in relation to the Soviet Union to be able to negotiate from strength? A positive answer is being postponed to an ever more indefinite future. Trying to learn from history, we have set out on an armament race that must lead to war if it is not subordinated to the professed objective of a negotiated settlement. Here again we have learned but half the lesson and have replaced one error with another.

IV

Most often political blunders consist in this over-emphasis of one element in a

situation at the expense of others. The 1920's and 1930's saw the underestimation by the Western world of the uses of power toward moral and legal ends. The Second World War saw but a seeming interruption of that trend, for power was used then in an effort to restore conditions of harmony and "normalcy" under which we could again rely on law and morality and, as it were, forget about power. We seemed at the time to have learned a lesson from our pre-war relations with the Axis powers: we had neglected power; now we would use it without limit until those who had compelled us to do so were forced to surrender their own power unconditionally. With that task accomplished, we would be able to return to the other extreme and build a new world, without power politics, on the foundations of law and morality.

Consistent with this point of view, we treated our wartime allies, including the Soviet Union, with that same disregard of considerations of power which had characterized our behavior toward everybody in the inter-war period. Yet the same experience that had forced us into power politics against Hitler was to be repeated in our dealings with the Soviet Union. And here, too, we seem to have learned our lesson now. Having shown good will, we now "get tough." Since one can not deal with Stalin by legal contract and without regard for the realities of power, we will now deal with him with the instruments of power alone, without concern for legal stipulations to be agreed upon through mutual suasion. Just as the only alternative to appeasement of Germany, Japan, or Italy without power had been war, so the alternative to appeasement of the Soviet Union is another kind of war.

WE ALSO learned from the experiences of the 30's what a blunder isolationism was, which would let one fight only in defense of one's own country but not in defense of allies. But in learning that lesson we are by way of falling into the opposite error: having realized the error of fighting for nobody but oneself, we are now willing

to fight for anybody threatened by the common enemy. Collective security, after all, is as abstract and a-political a principle of action as isolationism, equally impervious to the complexity of all political issues which must be decided not according to abstract principles, but by the calculation of opposing interests and powers.

We intervened in Korea because the principle of collective security required it, thus seemingly avoiding the mistake Great Britain and France had made when they refused to defend Ethiopia in 1935-36 and Czechoslovakia in 1938. Actually, we made exactly the same mistake, only in a different way. Truman in 1952 faces the same dilemma Prime Minister Baldwin could extricate himself from in 1936 only at an enormous loss to British prestige. Collective security as a defense of the status quo short of war can be effective only against second-rate powers. Directed against a major power, it is a contradiction in terms, for it inevitably means a major war. Of this self-defeating contradiction Stanley Baldwin was unaware in the 30's as Truman is still unaware of it today. Churchill put Baldwin's dilemma in these cogent terms: "First, the Prime Minister had declared that sanctions meant war; secondly, he was resolved that there must be no war; and thirdly, he decided upon sanctions. It was evidently impossible to comply with these three conditions." Similarly Truman had declared that the effective prosecution of the Korean war meant the possibility of a third world war; he resolved that there must be no third world war; and he decided upon the Korean war. Here, too, it is impossible to comply with these three conditions.

In 1950, as in 1935 and 1938, the issue might better have been decided in terms of the interests involved and the power available as against the interests and power of other nations. Instead, it was resolved in all three instances, either positively or negatively, in the abstract terms of collective security, a principle which could be applied against a major power only at the risk of world war. Before we went to war

to defend South Korea in the name of collective security, we should have asked ourselves four questions: First, what is our interest in the preservation of the independence of South Korea; second, what is our power to defend that independence against North Korea; third, what is our power to defend it against China and the Soviet Union; and fourth, what are the chances of preventing China and the Soviet Union from entering the Korean war? We have been asking those questions—but only of late, after we are already committed and have lost the freedom of action which the right answers to those questions, posed at the right time, might have saved for us. By substituting an abstract principle of law for the calculation of the concrete conditions of interests and power, we involved ourselves in a war that, in view of these relations of interests and power, we can neither win nor lose. Such are the results of a foreign policy which tries to avoid the mistakes of the past without understanding the principles that should have governed the actions of the past.

We realized what had been wrong with our policies, but in supplying what had been lacking we threw overboard what was no less essential than what we were trying to supply. Thus the very correction of past blunders created new ones. We had seen that diplomacy without power was not enough, so we added power and forgot about diplomacy. We had seen that a nation must stop aggression before it reaches her own shores, and we concluded that we had now to stop all aggression regardless of how our own interests and power were affected. We learned the specific lessons of the last two decades, but in the process we came to neglect the Lesson of History: *that political success depends upon the simultaneous or alternative use of different means at different times, and the moderate use of all of them at all times.*

V

MAN is never able to look at history with the same objectivity as at inani-

mate nature. The moral limitation upon his understanding of history is pride: pride in his intellect, pride in his goodness, pride in the collectivity with which he identifies himself as against other collectivities.

Pride in intellect shows itself in the persistence with which ideas once adopted are applied time and again, regardless of how discredited by experience. A general whose strategy brought victory in one war finds in success an additional reason for using the same methods in the next war. He did it once, and he is going to do it again. What General MacArthur was able to do to the Japanese in the Second World War he must be able to do to the Chinese in the Korean War.

Even if a certain strategy has been unsuccessful, there is a strong tendency to try it out again, especially if the general sluggishness of the human mind encourages it. The Maginot Line was a disastrous failure in the Second World War. But man is almost irresistibly attracted by the image of a wall behind which he will be safe from the enemy. Since the Maginot Line was a failure, as was the Chinese Great Wall before it, why not build a bigger and better Maginot Line? Or perhaps a bigger and better general will do what General Gamelin was unable to do with the Maginot Line in 1940. The most subtle perversion of the lessons of history is that which appears to heed the experiences of the past and discard its faulty methods, while continuing nonetheless to think in terms of the past. To build a line of static fortifications parallel to the Rhine was certainly a mistake that we shall not emulate. Instead, we shall create a Western European army that will defend Europe at the Elbe, at the Rhine, or wherever else it may be. We seem to have learned a lesson from history; but in view of the novel requirements of global strategy and the numerical superiority of the Russian land armies, have we really?

Pride in intellect is joined by pride in virtue. All individuals and collectivities like to see their conflicts with others not in terms of interest and power determined by

circumstances, but in terms of moral values determined by abstract principles. When our policies fail, as they did in relation to the Soviet Union after the Second World War, the explanation cannot lie in our having miscalculated our interests and power in relation to the interests and power of the other side. Our failure must be the result of the wickedness of the other side, which took advantage of our guileless trust. We trusted once and were deceived; from now on we shall be on our guard and see the enemy for what he is. Yalta then becomes a symbol, not of the legal ratification of errors of political and military judgment, but of a moral deception that the wicked perpetrated upon the good.

Even so realistic an observer as Mr. Wilmot falls prey to moral pride when he interprets the Yalta Conference. But more than this, he suffers, like virtually everyone else, from the most pervasive pride of our time: pride in collectivity, that is, nationalism. When he tries to formulate the military lessons of the war, he almost automatically takes the side of the British against the Americans;* discussing the lessons to be drawn from Churchill's Balkan strategy, he takes at face value Mr. Churchill's own interpretation.

WHILE such onesidedness, which impairs historical judgment and thus our ability to learn from history, seems inevitable in even the greatest of historians, there are specific manifestations of it that, as great statesmen have shown, can be controlled by moral discipline. One such manifestation is the habit of overestimating one's own power and understanding the other side's. The history of the relations between the Western world and the Soviet Union since 1917 could be written in terms of the underestimation of Russian power. From the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War through the debates on the imple-

* There exists also a contrary form of this pride, an anti-nationalism which sees all wickedness in one's own country and all virtue somewhere else; the most conspicuous victims of this pride are the fellow-travelers of Communism.

mentation of the Franco-Russian alliance of 1935, the Russian offer of support to Czechoslovakia in 1938, the Anglo-French military mission to Moscow in 1939, the German attack upon the Soviet Union in 1941, the first atomic explosion in Russia in 1949, up to the very present, we have always underestimated the power of the Soviet Union. We have done so because we are inflexibly opposed on moral grounds to both Communism and Russian imperialism. Thus our moral sentiment stands in the way of a correct appraisal of the realities of power. To separate our pride in our own moral superiority from our historical judgment, which might lead us to recognize the political and military superiority of the Soviet Union in certain respects, requires an effort at moral detachment which few, obviously, are willing to make. It is easier and more satisfactory to conclude that political and military superiority necessarily go hand in hand with moral superiority. Here again moral pride stands between our judgment and historical experience.

The classic example of this kind of pride, and of its disastrous political and military consequences, is Hitler's. Since Bismarck, it had been the basic axiom of German strategy that Germany could not win a two-front war. However, it was exactly such a war that she deliberately embarked upon both in 1914 and 1941. Hitler himself was resolved not to make this blunder, but he could not help making it, for he believed firmly that it was Germany's "mission" to triumph over her enemies. Holding such a faith, he was led to assume that Germany had already won the war against the West when she had not yet done so, and could therefore safely invade the Soviet Union.

If we find it so difficult to learn from history, the fault is not with history, but with the pride and the intellectual limitations of men. History, in the words of Thucydides, is philosophy learned from examples. Those who are morally and intellectually inferior to its teachings, history leads to disaster. Those who are philosophers in the moral and intellectual sense, it teaches.

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